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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to test the hypothesis that adults' differential definitions of social competence for boys and for girls may contribute to lack of agreement between teachers' and classmates' ratings of children's social competence. Subjects were 540 children in fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms in four public schools in the greater Boston area. Two schools were upper middle class suburban, one was urban in a disadvantaged neighborhood, and one was suburban with a substantial population of recently arrived immigrants. Teachers were asked to nominate up to three children from their classrooms who matched a short paragraph describing three categories of social behavior: socially inhibited, aggressive/acting-out, and socially competent. Students in each class were administered the Minnesota Revision of the Class Play Inventory (CPI). The revised CPI yields a summary score on three behavioral categories: popular/leadership, aggressive/disruptive, and sensitive/isolated. The top three scorers in each behavioral category on the CPI and the three children nominated by their teachers were compared with respect to the sex of the children nominated. Teacher and peer nominations differed in that teachers, whether male or female, seldom assigned girls to the aggressive/acting-out category. Reasons for sex differences in teachers' ratings were explored and the importance of convergent measures of social competence was emphasized. (RH)

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Sex Differences in Teachers' Assessments of Their Students' Social Competence

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The assessment of children's social competence is an area of expanding research interest because of a growing interest in children's interactions with peers and the contributions of healthy peer relations to the development of adult competencies. Good relationships with one's childhood peers have been discussed as vital to the development of a sense of self (Fine, 1981), aspects of cognitive and moral development (Youniss, 1980; Piaget, 1932), and academic development (Allen, 1976).

Even clinicians working in the traditions of psychoanalysis, whose focus has traditionally been on parent-child relations, and who have traditionally treated relations with peers as significant only as indicators of healthy or unhealthy sibling relationships, are coming to recognize the unique contribution of peer relationships to the development of adult social competence (Grunebaum and Solomon, 1980). In part, clinicians' interest in healthy peer relationships in childhood is justified by examination of longitudinal studies that demonstrate a correlational link between social competence in middle childhood and later psychopathological outcomes. Although the interpretation of this research is not without controversy (see Conger and Keane, 1981), a growing number of psychologists and educators have designed interventions to help children with social adjustment difficulties, or the population of "children without friends." A number of these studies have demonstrated that various intervention programs can positively affect children's relations with their peers, either by increasing rates of interaction of social isolates (O'Connor, 1969, 1972; Furman and Rahe, 1979) or by affecting the children's sociometric status (Oden & Asher, 1977; Ladd, 1981;

Gottman, Gonso, and Schuler, 1976). Indeed, the interest in remediating the population of "children without friends" through social skills training or other, less programmatic, interventions has recently been identified in the popular literature as a tidal wave of well-meaning clinicians attempting to make children and adults more "likeable" (Timnick, 1982).

Selection of children for participation in social skills training programs raises important questions about the assessment of social competence. Interventions that are designed to address the social skills deficits of the "child without friends" usually depend upon some form of sociometric measure as an index of the child's social status in the classroom group. These ratings may take different forms, and reflect different aspects of a child's social status: for example, a "peer nomination" sociometric, which asks each child to name three "best friends," may measure a different aspect of social competence than a "peer rating" measure (in which a child is asked to rate each child in the class on a one-to-five scale of how much each child is liked). A third sociometric technique, the "peer behavior assessment," requires children to rate other children in their class on specific behavior descriptions, without directly addressing the question of likability or popularity (Asher and Hymel, 1981). Each of these measures have been used in the social skills literature, and each of them has been demonstrated to have desirable psychometric properties, including test-retest reliability and concurrent validity (Foster and Ritchey, 1979).

A significant problem with the use of sociometric techniques in selection of children for social skills training programs and for

evaluation of these programs is the reactivity of the measure when repeated (Gresham, 1981; Deno, Mirkin, Robinson, & Evans, 1980). There are also ethical considerations involved in the use of sociometric techniques that make repeated use of them in public school classrooms difficult, if not impossible to use (Anderegg, Chess, Sorgi and Budoff, Note 1). For example, asking children to rate each other on likability asks them to ignore teachers' and parents' usual admonitions to refrain from making negative evaluations of other children (Deno, et. al., 1980) and may, in fact, highlight the isolate status of some children by focusing the attention of the class on issues of social status.

One solution to the problem of reactivity and intrusiveness of sociometric techniques has been to search for other sources of information about children's social competence that do not involve peer ratings. One such source of information is the child's classroom teacher, and recent research in the area of the assessment of social competence has demonstrated that classroom teachers are reliable sources of information about the social status of children in their classroom (Green, Forehand, Beck, and Vosk, 1980). Indeed, the classroom teacher can supply an unintrusive measure of social competence, and may be used to identify children for social skills training programs, although the utility of teacher ratings as an evaluation tool for such programs is limited. Repeated teacher ratings are subject to the effects of expectancy for change and are thus less than desirable for the repeated measures of social competence required in an evaluation of a social skills intervention (Deno et. al., 1980).

The foregoing discussion is limited to experimental evaluation of social skills interventions. The standards of reliability required by such research apparently preclude using teachers as the only source of information about children's social competence. In practice, however, referral by classroom teachers is frequently the sole criterion for public school children to be involved in psychotherapeutic services, either in an individual or group modality, especially when such services are provided by in-school personnel (guidance counselors, etc.). Public school personnel do not typically use sociometric instruments in the referral process, in large part because of the ethical and practical issues noted above. In our current work at the Research Institute for Educational Problems in designing and implementing a social skills intervention for use in public schools, the most frequent question asked about the assessment process is: "If there is a substantial (if not perfect) agreement between teachers and children in assessing social competence, why not just ask the teachers to nominate children for social skills training?" The data reported here were collected in an attempt to answer this question for ourselves, as social development researchers involved in public schools, and for the school personnel with whom we are working.

In our initial approach to the problem of identifying children for inclusion in a social skills intervention, informal nominations and formal rating scales were used to gather information from teachers about their students' social competence. As current discussions of the notion of "social competence" suggest, the standards for social competence for men and for women can be extremely divergent (Wine and Smye, 1981). Results of the informal nomination process on the part

of teachers suggested that the sex of the target child is, in fact, a critical variable when eliciting ratings of social competence. The investigation reported here is an attempt to test the hypothesis that adults' differential definitions of social competence for boys and for girls may contribute to the lack of agreement between teachers' and classmates' ratings of children's social competence.

Methods

Subjects were 540 children in fourth and fifth grade classrooms in elementary public school classrooms in four schools in greater Boston. The schools included two small upper-middle-class suburban school and one large urban school in a disadvantaged neighborhood. A fourth school was in a suburban setting, but with a substantial population of recently-arrived immigrants (including a large ESL population). Mean class size was 20.76 children.

Teacher ratings. Classroom teachers were asked to nominate up to three children from their classrooms who matched a short paragraph describing three categories of social behavior. (See Table I.) The focus of the descriptions was not children's popularity per se, but on differentiating a shy, withdrawn group and an aggressive or disruptive group of children within the classroom, as recent research has suggested that the population of "unpopular" children is not homogeneous but is made up of children from both of these behavior constellations (Conger and Keane, 1981). The sex of the children to be nominated was not specified in the instructions. The nominations were collected in late December and early January, at the same time as the peer rating described below.

Peer behavior rating. Students in each class were administered the Minnesota Revision of the Class Play (Morison and Masten, 1979, Note 2) in late December and early January, after they had had ample time to become acquainted with their classmates. The Minnesota Revision of the CPI is a peer behavior assessment, rather than a traditional sociometric; it involves a checklist of social behaviors that children observe in their classmates rather than directly addressing the "liked-disliked" dimension of traditional sociometric instruments. The earlier version of the Class Play Inventory has been shown to have high predictive validity for the development of behavior disorder and adult psychopathology (Rolf, 1972; Cowen, Pederson, Babigian, Izzo and Trost, 1973). The revised version corrects for some criticisms of the earlier version of the CPI, in that the items are clearly focused behavior descriptions rather than the more global roles (such as "school nurse") that were used in the earlier version of this instrument. The Revised CPI yields a summary score on three behavior categories: "popular/leadership," "aggressive/disruptive," and "sensitive/isolated," based upon the thirty items that make up the Inventory (see Table II). Boys and girls were assessed separately, but their scores were calculated as percentiles of total votes cast in the class, so that any combination of boys and girls could be nominated among the top scorers in the class.

Results

The top three scorers in each behavior category on the CPI and the three children nominted by their teachers were compared with respect to the sex of the child nominated. Results from this analysis

are shown in Tables III-VI. In a situation in which either boys or girls could have been nominated by their teachers and peers, a pattern of sex differences emerged in the teachers' nominations. Girls were seldom mentioned by their teachers for the "aggressive/ acting out" category; this difference contributed to the overall finding of lack of independence between behavior category and sex in the teachers' ratings ($X^2 = 26.966$, $p < .001$). This difference was constant for both male teachers ($X^2 = 12.596$, $p < .01$) and female teachers ($X^2 = 15.37$, $p < .001$). The children's ratings were independent of the sex of the nominee ($X^2 = .861$, N.S.).

Discussion

The above results suggest that teachers, in a situation in which the sex of the child to be evaluated is not specified, are not as likely to see girls as aggressive, disruptive, or acting out in a classroom situation, compared with the boys in their classroom. When their classroom peers have the opportunity to perform a similar evaluation task, girls are nominated almost as frequently as are boys in this behavior category. These findings are limited by the lack of identity between the behavior descriptions provided to the teachers and the classroom peers: although the behavior descriptions in each case were similar (see Tables I,II), they are not identical. The behavior description items on the CPI are clearly peer-oriented (for example, "Someone who shows off a lot") and not oriented to disruption of classroom activities. The behavior description provided to the teachers include references to peer status and also include references to the effect of the rated child's behavior on the classroom situation (for example, "These children frequently resort to attention-seeking

behaviors of an aggressive, disruptive and/or clowning nature which results in a rejection by peers and disruption of classroom activities."). If the teachers had been given a behavior checklist identical to that provided to the children, would their ratings have been more evenly distributed by sex? We hypothesize that the results would have been similar to the present findings, but it should be noted that this question is not answerable with the data presented here.

Bearing this limitation in mind, we may hypothesize about the reasons for the sex differences in the teachers' ratings of their students' behavior. A simple explanation is that boys are more aggressive or acting out than are girls. Support for this explanation may be found in epidemiological studies of psychopathological child behaviors, which have demonstrated that boys are much more likely than are girls to be referred or identified as exhibiting conduct disorders, including aggression to peers, disobedience in school, stealing, and, among older children, truancy, vandalism, etc. In summarizing a number of these epidemiological studies, Quay and Werry (1979) suggest that the ratio of boys to girls evicing antisocial or conduct disorders is at least three to one. This differential in conduct disorders has been explained by reference to biological (including hormonal and maturational) factors and child-rearing practices (Rutter, 1977).

If we accept this explanation, then the children's view of their classroom peers is clearly in error: the children are not perceiving the differential pattern of conduct disorder by sex that has been established in epidemiological studies. We may postulate, as Quay and

Werry have done, that peer ratings are not reliable indices of psychopathological behavior. As discussed above, current research suggests that this is not the case; peer ratings have been demonstrated to have both concurrent (Morison & Masten, 1979) and predictive validity (Cowen, et. al., 1973) for identifying children with behavior problems.

An alternative hypothesis is that teachers and children have access to different information when assessing the social behavior of students/peers. Classroom peers interact in situations where teachers are not present (the playground, the bathroom, etc.) and may observe different behaviors in each other when an adult is present and when an adult is not present. If we accept this hypothesis as explaining why girls are seen as less aggressive by teachers than they are by peers, these data suggest that girls are less publicly or visibly aggressive to their pears when a teacher or adult is present; when an adult is not present, boys and girls may be equally aggressive with their peers. Corroboration for this interpretation may be found in a number of studies of sex differences in aggressive behavior in childhood. Hoyenga and Hoyenga (1979) suggest in their review of aggressive behavior in childhood that girls may be more aggressive in the presence of peers because of the cultural prescription involved in child-rearing practices: girls, being more consistently punished for being aggressive in childhood, may express aggression indirectly, or may express aggression in situations in whcih one is not iikely to be punished (i.e., in the absence of teachers and adults). Macoby and Jacklin (1974), in their review of research on sex differences in conformity, note that girls are more conforming in the presence of

adults, but there are not significant differences in conforming behavior when in the presence of peers.

The "indirect" character of girls' aggressive responses toward others has been established in the work of Norma Feshbach (Feshbach, 1969; Feshbach & Sones, 1971), in which girls' responses to newcomers entering the social field were more indirectly aggressive than boys' responses. The girls in the Feshbach studies were more snubbing, ignoring and rejecting of newcomers' suggestions in these experimental groups, while boys were either more welcoming or more physically aggressive toward newcomers.

The character of the aggressive responses of girls in the Feshbach research was informally corroborated in the present study by the comments of the leaders of the social skills training groups that contained these female subjects. As noted above, the data reported here was the first stage in identifying children with social skills deficits for a remediation program in social skills training. The girls selected for these gorups were primarily identified through peer selction data, due to the lack of teacher nomination data in the "aggressive-acting out" category. When these girls were placed in groups, group leaders reported consistently that, while the "aggressive-acting out" boys were overtly disruptive in group sessions, the "aggressive-acting out" girls were initially compliant with suggestions for group activities. As the groups proceeded, group leaders began to report incidences of resistance or sabotage by some of these female subjects: one girl actively enlisted her peers to resist the group leader's suggestions, but did so outside the group; another began efforts to exclude another (unliked) girl by reporting

rumors about the group's negative evaluation of the unliked child, etc.

The data reported here have some implications for the selection process of children with social skills deficits. If girls are, in fact, behaving differently toward their peers when adults are not pesent, then teachers are not completely adequate as a source of information about children's peer relationships or about their social relationships in general. If teachers are the only source of information for the referral process for children lacking in social competence, these data suggest that girls who are aggressive to their peers will be systematically underrepresented in any pool of identified children. Thus, sociometric techniques, while occasionally cumbersome and intrusive, may be essential in the selection or referral process.

This research, in sum, supports the notion that convergent measures of coscial competence are an essential part of research or remediation effort in children's social competence (Asher & Hymel, 1981). Teachers' lack of knowledge about all the social actions of the children in their classroom may limit their ability to be completely reliable sources as referral agents; this mechanism may be one explanation for the high, but not perfect, correlation between teachers' and children's views of their classrom students/peers. Future research in this area may be directed toward investigation of differential patterns of evaluation by teachers and peers with respect to specific aggressive behaviors (i.e., the individual items that go together to make up the summary "aggressive/acting-out" category). In addition, this research suggests that both formal investigations, such

as social skills training program evaluations, and informal practice, such as teachers' nominations of children for attention from a school guidance counselor, need to take into account possible sources of systematic error based upon the sex of the referred child.

TABLE I

Behavior Categories for Teacher Nominations

1. Socially-Inhibited:

The "socially-inhibited" child is characterized by a tentativeness and apprehension regarding new situations and/or relationships. This child may be described as one who is shy and reluctant to enter group situations or activities. They do not display a competence or assertiveness regarding themselves or their ability to compete with other students or academic challenges. They may have developed a particular friend or liaison; however, the "socially-inhibited" child is rarely an active participant in a peer group. Although not disliked or rejected by classmates, this child is often ignored by peers and isolated from ongoing group dynamics. He or she generally relates and performs best in a one-to-one interaction with a familiar adult and in structured situations where expectations are known and defined.

2. Aggressive/Acting-Out:

The "aggressive/acting-out" child is the more visible student, characterized by inappropriate and impulsive responses to social and academic situations. These children frequently resort to attention-seeking behaviors of an aggressive, disruptive and/or clowning nature which result in a rejection by peers and disruption of classroom activities. They are often resistant to discipline and structured activities. Their behavior is to a large degree impulsive, acting with little regard to consequences or advance thought of reactions. Like the "socially-inhibited" child, they may experience discomfort with academic demands; however, they will often resist the guidance or input offered in a one-to-one situation by an adult or person in authority, i.e. teacher.

3. Socially-Competent:

The "socially-competent" child is one who displays a willingness to accept and ability to perform successfully within the academic and social demands of the classroom setting. These children relate to and are regarded positively by peers and can be characterized by a competency regarding their social and scholastic skills. They are usually cooperative with teacher-directed activities and unafraid to actively participate in group and creative activities. There is a concern regarding their own performance as well as acquiring recognition and acceptance from others.

TABLE II

Behavior Description Items from
The Minnesota Revision of the Class Play

Sociability/leadership

1. A person who is a good leader
2. A person with good ideas for things to do
3. Someone you can trust
4. Somebody who has many friends
5. Someone who will wait their turn
6. A person whom everyone listens to
7. Someone who plays fair
8. Someone who has a good sense of humor
9. Someone who is polite
10. Someone who makes new friends easily
11. A person everyone like to be with
12. A person who can get things going
13. Someone who is usually happy
14. Someone who likes to play with others rather than play alone

Aggressive/acting-out

1. A person who gets into a lot of fights
2. A person who loses their temper easily
3. Someone who shows off a lot
4. A person who interrupts when other children are speaking
5. A person who is too bossy
6. Somebody who teases other children too much
7. Somebody who picks on other kids

Sensitive/isolated

1. Someone who would rather play alone than with others
2. Someone whose feeling get hurt easily
3. Someone who has trouble making friends
4. A person who can't get others to listen
5. Somebody who is very shy
6. Someone who is often left out
7. Someone who is usually sad

TABLE III.

Frequency of teacher nominations in social behavior category by sex.

	Male	Female	
Popular/leadership	33	32	65
Aggressive/acting out	45	6	51
Isolated/withdrawn	30	39	69
	108	77	185

x^2 (2 df) = 26.97, p <.001

TABLE IV.

Frequency of child nominations in social behavior category by sex.

	Male	Female	
Popular/leadership	43	35	78
Aggressive/acting out	44	34	78
Isolated/withdrawn	38	40	78
	124	110	234

X^2 (2 df) = .861, NS.

TABLE V.

Frequency of male teacher nominations in social behavior category by sex.

	Male	Female	
Popular/leadership	16	16	32
Aggressive/acting out	21	4	25
Isolated/withdrawn	15	21	36
	52	41	93

X^2 (2 df) = 12.596, $p < .01$.

NOTE: THESE RESULTS ARE TO BE INTERPRETED WITH CAUTION DUE TO SMALL NUMBERS OF SUBJECTS IN CELLS.

TABLE VI.

Frequency of female teacher nominations in social behavior category by sex.

	Male	Female	
Popular/leadership	17	16	33
Aggressive/acting out	24	2	26
Isolated/withdrawn	15	18	33
	56	36	92

X^2 (2 df) = 15.37, $p < .001$.

NOTE: THESE RESULTS ARE TO BE INTERPRETED WITH CAUTION DUE TO SMALL NUMBERS OF SUBJECTS IN CELLS.

Reference Notes

1. Anderegg, D., Chess, J., Sorgi, M., and Budoff, M. Social development research and intervention in the schools: Methodological and practical issues. Symposium presented at the annual meeting of the New England Educational Research Organization, Rockport, Maine, April 26-28, 1983.

2. Morison, P., and Masten, A. The Minnesota Revision of the Class Play. Paper presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development. Boston, Mass., 1981.

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